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THE METHODIST FEDERATION FOR SOCIAL SERVICE
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An organization which rejects the method of the struggle for profit as the economic base for society; which seeks to replace it with social-economic planning in order to develop a society without class distinctions and privileges.

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THE SIT-DOWN STRIKE

"Sit-down" has become a household word in America. Since November 1933 there have been 78 sit-down strikes in this country. Of late they are spreading like wild-fire. Employers, government and public recognize that the sit-down is a tactic in the economic struggle that is here to stay.

THE BACKGROUND

The Sit-Down Abroad. During the past three years miners at the point of starvation in Jugoslavia, Hungary, Poland, Wales, France and Scotland, have used the sit-down to win concessions from employers. What the miners did on a small scale, French workers in 1936 did on a mass basis. The strike wave began in Paris in the metal industry where hours were long, wages low and the cost of living high. The movement spread in all directions, to all industries. The French Federation of Labor rose to 5,000,000, doubling its membership. At the peak about 1,000,000 workers were in possession of their plants. There was practically no violence. The strikers maintained perfect discipline, and took excellent care of the plants. In the summer of 1936 the Chamber of Deputies passed legislation restoring wage cuts, guaranteeing the 40 hour week and the right of labor to bargain collectively.

The Sit-Down in America. As early as 1910 workers in the coal fields and in the textile mills formed the practice of ceasing operations when industrial conditions were no longer tolerable. The Akron rubber workers were most instrumental in popularizing the sit-down in the United States. Louis Adamic, in *The Nation* explains that the members of two competing baseball teams of union rubber workers sat down and refused to play until an umpire who was a union man was produced. Later they remembered this technique, and used it to advantage in a dispute with the company. In the fall of 1933 sit-down strikes were called in Kenosha, Wisconsin, Austin, Minnesota, and Reading, Pennsylvania. The insecurity, the speed-up, the threat of lower wages and longer hours, and the refusal of the company to engage in genuine collective bargaining led to 19 sit-down strikes in the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company in the spring of 1936.

The Sit-Down in the Automobile Industry. In November 1936 sit-down strikes were held in the Bendix plant in South Bend, Indiana, and in the Midland Steel factory in Detroit. These strikes brought victory for the unions, as did the subsequent strike in the Kelsey-Hayes Wheel Company. In November and December 1936 the campaign of the United Automobile Workers of America to organize the General Motors Corporation workers was nearing a climax. The General Motors strike in Flint was the first major battle between non-union mass production industry and the Committee for Industrial Organization. It sets the pattern.

THE CAUSES

Terrorism. Like many other companies the General Motors Corporation for years practiced intimidation, espionage and terrorism against its employees. Systematic discrimination was used against union men. The merit clause in the NRA automobile code, the controlled Auto Labor Board, and the pliable National Labor Relations

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Board enabled the corporation to war against employees whose grievances were reaching the breaking point. The La Follette Civil Liberties Committee discovered that during the past three years General Motors paid nearly $840,000 to some fourteen detective agencies for keeping the company informed on strikes, union activities and "labor racketeers." The spies operated not only in the factories and in shadowing such government officials as F. F. McGrady, Assistant Secretary of Labor, but they functioned in keeping entire communities of workers under the company's thumb. S. Romer writes in *The Nation* that "long before the Black Legion appeared in the down-river Ford area, General Motors workers dreaded the 'Bullet Club,' a secret political organization whose officials practically displaced the formal employment agencies in hiring and firing."

Speed-Up. Workers in the General Motors plants particularly were opposed to the "speed-up," which meant more work and less pay per unit produced. This is a splendid device to cut labor costs. A General Motors worker is reported to have told the La Follette Commission that "this year we turned out 15 units per hour instead of the 10 we turned out last year. Our crew was reduced from 10 to 6 men and there was no pay increase." Workers hate the speed-up for it exhausts them, rendering them increasingly weak and nervous, ready to go on the scrap heap at the age of 40. The speed-up is also achieved through the piece-work method of payment. The hourly wage rates in General Motors are good, but the employee is forced to earn a year's income within 6 to 9 months. The corporation has stated that in 1935 the average annual wage for "steady workers" was $1,317 and in 1936, $1,490. However for the industry as a whole the average yearly income was $900, while 25% of the workers received less than $590 in 1934.

Profits. The fact that dividends and profits were increasing out of all proportion to the increase in wages led to intensified bitterness and the resolution to protest. While thousands of auto workers were living far below the standard of $1600 set by the Bureau of Home Economics for family life above the poverty line, the net return on the invested capital of the General Motors Corporation was $228,000,000. This represented a 24% profit for a company, one-quarter of whose stock is owned by a single family, which ownership in turn enables the DuPonts to control all the major policies of the corporation. In addition to this profit enormous salaries were paid to the company officials. The top 350 officers, directors and managers received an aggregate sum of $10,000,000 an increase for some of 50 to 100% over the remuneration in 1934. General Motors workers became aroused when they learned that the average salary for 17 officials in 1935 was $222,311.78. Alfred P. Sloan, the President, received $191.31 per hour every day of the year, not to mention the sum he and his associates secured from their stock holdings. The workers reasoned that this company could afford to pay its employees a living wage.

The Need to Organize. From 1921 to 1935 the American Federation of Labor made sporadic unsuccessful attempts to organize workers in the automobile industry along craft lines. It tried to organize carpenters, plasterers, and mechanics, employed in different factories, into unions based on the performance of similar functions. All mass production industries have developed the machine to the point where craft lines between workers are broken down. All employees in these industries have similar jobs and similar interests. Hence the demand for one union to speak for all the workers in every company. Industrial unionism grew as the only means of meeting the belligerent corporations on anywhere nearly equal terms. The United Automobile Workers of America, an industrial union formed in August 1935, joined the C.I.O. drive in the summer of 1936. By December 1, 1936, employees were joining at the rate of 2,000 a day. The union's request for a conference with the company leaders to discuss employees' grievances was refused. The effort of the corporation to move some of the dies from the Flint plant to other sections of the country where labor conditions were "more favorable" precipitated the sit-down strike which soon paralyzed production throughout the vast General Motors system.

THE BATTLE

The First Offensive. From the first the corporation officials insisted that they would not negotiate so long as the strikers held the plants. The union's offer to leave the plants on the condition that the company pledge itself not to operate them or remove machinery while negotiations were in progress, was rejected. Judge Edward D. Black, the alleged owner of 3,665 shares of General Motors stock valued at $219,900, issued a sweeping injunction restraining the union from occupying the plants, from picketing, and from interfering in any manner with those who wished to enter the plant to work. The union petitioned the state legislature to impeach Judge Black for sitting in on a case in which he had an interest. That was that.

The Next Move. The local press and the radio were used in the effort to prove that the majority wanted to work and were "loyal." This device likewise failed. On January 11th the company changed its tactics. Joel Seidman writes "on that day the heat in the plants was shut off, and city police mobilized in the area. Company

police endeavored to starve out the sit-downers, attacking the carriers of food and removing the ladders by means of which food had been brought in. Tear gas bombs were hurled against sit-downers and their sympathizers. The city police attacked in an effort to recapture the company gates. For four hours the strikers fought the police who used clubs, tear gas and riot guns. Fourteen workers were wounded by police gunfire, and dozens were tear-gassed." Following mediation by Governor Murphy, who had mobilized the National Guard to Flint, a truce was arranged. On January 18th, the plants were to be evacuated and negotiations to take place between the corporation officials and the union.

A Breach of Faith. Thirty minutes before the sit-downers were to march out of the Flint plants, the union discovered that W. S. Knudsen, executive vice-president, had agreed to bargain collectively with the Flint Alliance, semi-vigilante strike-breaking organization inspired by the company. The men considered this a breach of faith, and stayed put. Governor Murphy and Secretary Perkins made repeated efforts to mediate, but without success. Vigilante groups under company instigation did their best to promote violence against and from the strikers, so that martial law would be declared. On February 1, strategic Chevrolet Plant No. 4 was the scene of a sit-down, and now no General Motors production was possible. On the following day Judge Gadola issued an injunction much more drastic than that issued by Judge Black the month before. The sheriff was unable to enforce this injunction, and Governor Murphy refused to use the militia. On February 11th, under the skillful and patient mediation of the Governor, an agreement was reached and the strike ended.

CONSEQUENCES

Gains for Labor. By virtue of the agreement between the corporation and the United Automobile Workers the employees gained recognition for their union, genuine collective bargaining in effect for all in the 20 factories on strike, freedom from discrimination against union men, the right to wear union buttons and seek after new members, in addition to an increase in wages amounting to five cents an hour. These gains give impetus to the organization, on an industrial basis, of workers in other mass production industries. Promptly upon the settlement of the General Motors strike the Packard and Chrysler corporations announced increases in wage rates. The spirit, the morale, the militancy of this victory is catching. Steel, the citadel of the open shop surrendered. The agreement between the Carnegie-Illinois Steel Company and the Steel Workers Organizing Committee is leading to markedly improved wages and working conditions, and to the recognition of the independent industrial union of the steel workers.

Reducing Violence. The killings and wholesale clubbings of pickets who were unprotected and an easy prey to hired thugs and professional strike-breakers are not possible during the sit-down strike. The workers are sheltered, they have a means of defense and a genuine protection for their jobs. "Scabs" can do them no harm, nor have they much to fear from those employers who habitually break agreements. Above all the sit-down places the responsibility for violence sharply on the shoulders of the owners, and their instruments the courts and the police. Thus the courts now cannot enforce the demands of the property system without a degree of bloodshed which is unbearable.

Democratic Control. Since the sit-down strike is the spontaneous action of the rank and file, it makes for democratic control in the labor movement. The workers on strike have to organize their food supply, their recreation, their police, some education and their means of defense. In the General Motors strike everything within the plants ran like clockwork, and no move was made without the vote of the men. When William Green calls the sit-down un-American and interprets the present struggle purely in personal terms, between John L. Lewis and himself, the rank and file grin because they know how much the rank and file controls the industrial union.

Legality. The sit-down strikers have refused to obey injunctions, judge-made law. The corporations have refused to obey the Wagner Act, the law passed by Congress. The reactionaries, seconded by William Green, proclaim the sit-down illegal. Then they contradict themselves by demanding that Congress and the states outlaw it. The legal authorities are puzzled. The judges differ. The law department of the National Manufacturers' Association tells its members ten ways to fight the sit-down in the courts, but admits there are few precedents. So it drags out the old law of conspiracy which was used against unions when they first formed and then against strikers. Then it relies upon the law against trespass. But Professor Green and Morris Ernst proclaim the social nature of industrial property and insist that trespass does not apply. A factory is not the backyard of a home. The strikers assert a property right in their jobs.

In the Making. Once more law is in the making, as Secretary Perkins observed. Once again it has to catch up with social facts. Once it was illegal to have a union, then to strike, then to picket. Now picketing is transferred from the streets, which are public property, to the plant, which is what? To what degree is it "an incident of

the industrial relation," affected with the public interest? This issue cannot be settled by attempting to enforce the law of trespass which was designed for personal property. Behind the question of conflicting property rights between capital and labor, and between various sections of labor who differ about the union and the strike, is a bigger question of social policy which has to be answered before these other difficulties can be adjusted.

The Necessity for Social Ownership. The sit-down raises clearly the issue of who is finally to own and control industry. The workers stay in the plant where they are employed and where they perform their social function not in order to "trespass" (for they have no intention of operating the machines) but merely to protect their jobs. Public attention is thus called to the fact that they who invest their labor and their lives in an industry have at least as much at stake as they who merely invest their money. The whole country is compelled to see that industry has become a social process. When General Motors stops, the local community, related industries and the economic life in many different states begin to suffer. This interdependent process must be socially administered if it is to continue to operate. For its effective and socially useful functioning a common plan, common control and mutual agreement among all concerned are required.

THE ATTITUDE OF RELIGION

A Typical Attitude. Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, pastor of the Marble Collegiate Church, New York City, exclaims: "In America hundreds of people sit-down and get up at the dictate of one man. If he can get them to do this what is to prevent an individual from calling a general strike?" The facts, fully reported, show that the sit-down is a movement of the rank and file.

The Federal Council of Churches. The Information Service declares, "when the right of labor to organize and bargain through representatives of its own choosing is denied by owner and managers labor is likely to adopt extreme measures to obtain that right. The sit-in is a dangerous weapon. It can be employed in a tyrannical way by a minority of workers who happen to be in a position to tie up a huge concern by taking possession of key plants." This statement points to the need of maintaining democratic control within the unions at all times.

The United Christian Council for Democracy. A bulletin of the Council issued March 1, 1937, makes the following statements: "The sit-down strike is one of the new weapons appropriated by the workers to gain the primary right of collective bargaining. The sit-down strike is an effective non-violent way of asserting the right of the worker to a job, to a share in the control of the tools with which he creates the wealth of America. It is being assailed because it is an effective answer to the legal and extra-legal means which have been used to make peaceful picketing outside company property impossible. The United Christian Council believes that the questions raised by the sit-down strike are a challenge to our civilization to bring its property concepts into conformity with the needs of social justice."

Sources: "Sit-Down," by Joel Seidman; Federal Council of Churches "Information Service," Feb. 6th; *The Nation*, Dec. 5, 1936, and Jan. 23, 1937; *New Republic*, March 24th; the daily press.

OUR NATIONAL CONFERENCE

At Evanston, Illinois. Opens 10 A.M., May 4th. Closes 4 P.M., May 6th. Annual Meeting, 2:30 P.M., May 5th. McConnell Anniversary Dinner, 6 P.M., May 5th (75c). Prominent speakers.

By request of members program will discuss the working out of our principles in action, with analysis of concrete situation. The Conference is for members only, except that members may bring one interested friend as a prospective member. Make up a car-load from your locality.

Rooms at "Y" and private homes, $1 a night. Hotel rooms at usual rates. Committee will present plan to reduce inequality in travel expense. Registration fee 50 cents, to cover local committee expenses, paid on arrival. To be sure of rooms send registration to Professor Irl G. Whitchurch, Garrett Buildings, Evanston, Ill.

See that your Conference Group, no matter how far away, has some representative present. If necessary, elect one and share expenses.

We are indebted for the preparation of this Bulletin to Rev. Jule Ayers of New York City.

A $1 membership brings this Bulletin once a month except in July and August. 20c plus 1½c postage brings our set of 18 Crisis Leaflets.